Writing a Radio Script

Writing for radio is different than writing for print. You’re writing for the ear, not the eye. Listeners have to get it the first time around- they can’t go back and hear it again (unlike re-reading a sentence in a magazine). And while a reader may get up and come back to an article, a radio listener who gets up may not come back. So you want to grab their attention and hold onto it for as long as possible.

As you start writing your script the place to start is usually the “anchor intro”- this is what the announcer/host will say to introduce your story. An anchor intro quickly sets up your story and puts it in context, without giving away too much. It should also introduce you, the reporter.

As you write your narration, try to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Draw listeners into the story by setting a scene, raising a question, playing a weird noise, or introducing a character. Use narrative elements like foreshadowing, suspense, and scene changes to move the story along.

A few aesthetic considerations to keep in mind as you write your script:

* Be conversational. Your narration should sound as natural as possible, like you’re telling a story to a friend. This is not the same as trying to imitate spontaneous speech. Instead, this means writing in a style that sounds as relaxed as possible. Use phrases and words you normally use. When you read your narration aloud, do you sound like yourself?
* Be visual. Give your listeners a chance to imagine the people, places and things in your story. Create a sense of scene; describe people; include interesting sounds. Avoid a story that’s just a series of talking heads or facts.
* Be concise. Long sentences loaded with ten-cent words and relative clauses usually don’t work too well in radio (but there are exceptions). Mix up your sentence structure. It’s surprisingly easy to fill 3 or 4 minutes of airtime- so don’t overwrite.
* Be energetic. Use the active voice. Use punchy verbs and contractions. Mind your tenses – don’t switch back and forth between past and present. Most radio stories are done in present tense. Some exceptions include commentaries, and news stories about past events.
* Be thoughtful. Try to go beyond just presenting the facts. Let your listeners know why your story matters. Is there a lesson to be learned, something to be taken away? You don’t have to get too heavy or cerebral- just take it a step or two beyond pure description.

Radio scripts generally follow a common format. Here are a few guidelines:

* Give the phonetic spelling of hard-to-pronounce words and names in parentheses after the name. Write out numbers and abbreviations – it will slow your read down if you have to figure out how to say 1,459 when you could read “one thousand, four hundred and fifty nine” Not that you should use such a specific number in your story-use approximate numbers.
* Note the estimated length of the entire story (without the anchor intro) at the top of the script. A rough rule of thumb to use: one page of single-spaced script usually corresponds to a minute and a half to two minutes of produced tape.

**Example of a Transcript:**

**Radio Presenter One:** Nearly 30 million Americans travel the country in those self-contained suburban homes on wheels known as recreational vehicles, or RVs. It’s not always easy to find a place to park your Winnebago for the night. But sleepy RVers need look no further than the nearest Wal-Mart. For years, the mega-chain has let weary travelers camp in its parking lots for free. Dave Gilson recently met some of the people who have taken it up on the offer.

**Radio Presenter Two**: It’s Friday evening at the Wal-Mart in Livermore, California. Inside the store, a nice old lady greets customers at the door and suburban families push shopping carts through the mazelike aisles of clothes, tools, DVD players and toys.

Outside, beyond the rows of minivans and SUVs, a scraggly-looking 29-year old named Rufus Luker [ROO-fus LOO-kur] has just cranked up a portable generator, getting ready for another night in the parking lot of America’s biggest retail chain. For the past three weeks, he and his wife and two young kids had been camping out here in a 35-foot RV. To hear Rufus talk about it, crashing at Wal-Mart is almost like a religious experience. (0:16)

**Rufus**: My aunt used to drive trucking for Wal-Mart and she was the one who enlightened me that before Wal-Mart died, Wal-Mart said, “As long as a driver needs a place to stay, he’s got my parking lot to use.”

**Radio Presenter Two**: You’re talking about Sam Walton, the guy who founded the place?

Rufus: Yes, yes! Mr. Sam.

Radio Presenter Two: Thanks to Mr. Sam’s generosity, Rufus and his family will always have a free place to park as they make the grand tour from Florida to California and back again. And in return, Rufus makes sure he puts a little something back to Mr. Sam’s multi-billion dollar empire.

Rufus: Most of our money is spent at Wal-Mart on their food products, household products, cleaning, toilet pa— whatever necessity we need, we usually find it at Wal-Mart. Although this isn’t a Super Wal-Mart. The Super Wal-Marts are the best.

Song One: Walmart theme song [35sec]